

## IMPERIAL INTERVENTION

For cases involving "normal" acts of violence, the tragedies recorded in the routine memorials that recorded investigative reporting by magistrates at the local level and by their superiors further up the chain of judicial review, the emperor might have been only nominally involved. Executions were carried out in his name, and central government officials required his approval before they could proceed. In some cases, however, the emperor participated directly. The communications in the following report were found in a chronologically arranged collection of imperial edicts and the memorials they inspired.

## CASE 20

*Li Yuchang: A Magistrate Murdered for His Integrity*  
(Jiangsu, 1809)

TRANSLATED WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF JOANNA WALEY-COHEN

*Li Yuchang was a newly minted jinshi, a holder of the highest degree in the civil-service examination system, and was about to take his first position as district magistrate of Shanyang, in Jiangsu, when a natural disaster intervened. In 1809, there was a flood in parts of that province, and he was reassigned as one of the ten commis-*

sioners who were to oversee the distribution of disaster relief funds in the area. Soon after he arrived, however, he was invited to join an embezzlement scheme: a number of local officials planned to exaggerate the population statistics in order to collect more government relief funds (paid in silver) and pocket the difference. Li not only refused to participate but even threatened to file formal complaints against those who did. Before long, he was dead, the victim of greedy underlings and several utterly unscrupulous colleagues.

The official record of this homicide and its outcome appears in memorials and edicts that passed nearly daily back and forth between the Jiaqing emperor and the senior members of his Grand Council during late summer of 1809, from 6.21 (August 2) to 7.24 (September 3).<sup>1</sup> It would appear that some of the officials involved were initially skeptical about whether such an outrageous offense could really have taken place. When everyone was convinced, the emperor demanded the highest penalties for all involved—not only because they had committed murder but also because of their concerted effort to defraud the relief system of the realm, a cornerstone of responsible Confucian government.

As if it were not enough that the highest officials of the Qing empire were outraged by these crimes, the natural order itself became unbalanced. According to witnesses, the spirit of the dead man returned to take possession of the minds of the living in order to articulate his mournful complaints of injustice. Surely it was to propitiate this restless spirit—and to deter further embezzlement of relief funds—that the emperor took the extraordinary step of ordering that the murderers be dismembered and that executions be carried out at the murdered man's tomb.

Because he was to be the next magistrate of Shanyang District, Li Yuchang is often referred to as Magistrate Li, even though he never served in that capacity.

Your subject, Grand Councilor Tie [Bao], Governor-general of the provinces of Liang Jiang, on Jiaqing 14.6.21 [August 2, 1809], having respectfully received YOUR HIGHNESS'S INSTRUCTION concerning the unclear matter of the death of Li Yuchang: At this time, when Shandong deputed several personnel to open his coffin and to inspect the corpse of Li Yuchang, they discovered numerous dark spots on the bones of his joints, above and below, which must in fact be evidence that he was hanged after he had been poisoned. When there are further facts, I will submit a MEMORIAL accordingly.

Further, I have heard that on the twenty-second of the first month of this year [March 7, 1809], Jing Chongfa, Li Yuchang's old friend, all of a sudden became wild and confused; he fell to the ground and declared, "I am Li Yuchang, returned from Shanyang, where I died most bitterly!" And he wept without stopping. A few moments later, Jing Chongfa ceased breathing.

We have taken into custody and have delivered to the capital for investigation a group of felons, to be interrogated by members of the Grand Council and the Board of Punishments. They will be examined so strenuously that not a shred of evidence can be concealed. Previously, when this case was first examined at Jiangsu, officials seemingly could find no reason for which the magistrate and the prefect should poison the administrator, now deceased, and for them to carry out such a thorough cover-up. Furthermore, the higher of those two administrators gave evidence intended to mislead when he declared that the late magistrate had of his own accord taken poison and then hanged himself. When he was enshrouded and encoffined, why should there be yellow paper spells on the body along with a small mirror? Moreover, lime had been daubed at various places around his face and body to obscure the marks there. Obviously, the relevant governor-general had failed in his duty to observe carefully and had been deceived.

Although we have already broken this case in general, [I,] Tie Bao, will further depute a clever and reliable person to investigate personally and determine how Li Yuchang was poisoned that day, whose plan this was, and who was involved. . . .<sup>2</sup>

*From a memorial of two days later, 14.6.23 (August 4):*

Yesterday, Your subjects met and personally brought in Ma Liansheng for intense and detailed examination. He testified:

"During the ninth month of last year, I accompanied my master Li Yuchang on his trip to the various townships of Shanyang District to inspect the relief efforts. On the twenty-eighth of the tenth month [December 15, 1808], we returned to the city of Huai'an. On the sixth, Lord Wang [Shenhan] of Shanyang [then magistrate of Shanyang District] invited my master to drink wine, and my master proceeded to the great gate of the *yamen*. But as it happened, Lord Wang had official business and had gone out and was not able to entertain us. Instead, Lord Wang's younger brother and his legal secretary named Li, along with deputy inspectors of the relief effort named Lin and Gong, had wine with us. By the second watch, the party broke up, but just then Lord Wang returned to the *yamen* and instructed his household staff to detain us a bit longer. All the guests had another round of tea. After my master drank his tea, I felt his words had become somewhat confused: he asked me whether I had brought along my blanket to the district court. Everyone found his words absentminded. Thereafter, my master returned to rest at the place where we were staying, the Virtuous Rewards Abbey. There,

he said to us, 'In the district, they have no record of my family; probably we'll have to go to Suzhou.' Li Xiang and I comforted him a bit, and Gu Xiang poured our master a cup of the tea that he had made previously and set it on the table. My master drank it and sat for a while, and then he went to bed to sleep. He told us to be up early the following morning so that he could make his report at Huai'an, rent a boat, and return home for a new assignment. Then, he told us to take away the lamp and close the door of his room. We, too, took off our clothes and went to sleep.

"We three were staying in the eastern room of the southern wing, and each went to sleep separately. The next morning, Li Xiang got up first and went to our master's room. Suddenly, he began shouting, saying that our master had been hanged. All of us went in, to discover that he was no longer breathing. Thereupon, we went to the Shanyang District *yamen* to report. Before long, [the administrative heads of] Huai'an Prefecture and Shanyang District both came to inspect [the scene]. The coroner called out his report before completing his examination of our master's dead body, saying he had died from suicide by hanging. I was watching from the side. All he did was loosen his [Li Yuchang's] clothing in front and take off one stocking during his inspection. He didn't look closely at any other part of the body. But when we were undressing him to put him into his burial clothes, we took off his jacket, and I saw several streaks of blood on the front of it and bloodstains at the corners of his mouth as well. The coroner and others wiped those stains away. On the following day, as we were placing him into the coffin, a yin-yang master [*yinyang sheng*] took a spell made of paper and a small mirror and placed them on his chest.<sup>3</sup> I saw all of this myself.

"Why my master wanted to shorten his own life, I really don't know. It was just that on the third or fourth of the eleventh month, I heard Li Xiang say that the master had gone to the district *yamen* and had talked about inspecting the relief efforts with Magistrate Wang. He asked about the rosters of people to be accounted for, and they got into an argument. They couldn't agree. Master wanted to inspect four townships, and he had already finished more than two. Lord Wang wanted to have the jailer carry out the inspections for him and say that our master had done it, but my master wouldn't agree to give them up. Again, he asked the district clerk for the general population registers, but the clerk would not give them to him. They were only sent over on the fifth. The master said, 'He deceived me. Ever since I first took office, he has treated me as if I were a child, and I won't put up with it.' And on the sixth, when he went to the party, when Lord Wang returned to the *yamen*, I saw the commissioner named Lin talking secretly

with him in the courtyard. I heard Commissioner Lin say, 'It's of utmost importance that you let me have a day or two before you go back.' Lord Wang said, 'I understand.' But I don't know what they were talking about; maybe it was something to do with this business. Beyond that, I couldn't make out what was said."

This felon's words were cunning, and his testimony very much seemed to have been crafted in advance with the intent to stall; it was not reliable. Allow me to examine him more rigorously, and when he has produced reliable testimony, I will prepare a MEMORIAL.<sup>4</sup>

*Subsequently, on the twenty-sixth, Ma Liansheng testified about the prefect and the magistrate coming to the murdered man's house and demanding the keys to his chests. They removed all the contents—records Li Yuchang had kept during his inspection of the disaster area, his account books, and even two personal letters he had been writing, anything on which he had written. They ripped up the letters and took the rest with them, telling Ma Liansheng that if any official should ask about the victim's activities on the day that he died, he need not mention the drinking party at the district yamen.<sup>5</sup> On the twenty-seventh, according to a response to an edict from the emperor, an official of the Board of Punishments reported that Wang Shenhan had been removed from office as magistrate of Shanyang District and taken into custody along with the governor-general of Liang Jiang T'ie Bao, Wang's servant Hu Tai, the coroner Li Biao, and the court clerk Zhu Xueli.<sup>6</sup>*

*In a memorial dated 14.6.27 (August 8) the following day, the governor-general of Zhili announced that, during interrogation, the inspector whom Ma Liansheng had identified only as Lin was in fact Lin Yongsheng; his secret conversation with Magistrate Wang Shenhan was the "key" (guanjian) to the whole case.<sup>7</sup>*

On 14.6.28, a team of officials from the Board of Punishments questioned Wang Shenhan, the coroner, a clerk, and the monk of the abbey where the murdered man had been staying.

Your subjects again raised the question of how blood could flow from the mouth of a man who had hanged himself. And why this was not filled in on the coroner's report during the inquest. And why the drinking party at the district yamen on the sixth was not mentioned in [previous] testimony. . . .

*The interrogators apparently cross-examined the cashiered magistrate relentlessly but on this occasion, he did not admit to any lying. For his part, the coroner Li Biao admitted dereliction of duty in failing to examine the body thoroughly.<sup>8</sup> During his*

*testimony later that day, Hu Tai, accountant for the cashiered magistrate Wang, admitted having seen dark blotches on the murdered man's face.*

*Hu Tai testified:*

"On the eighth, when the body was being encoffined, I saw that Magistrate Li was wearing his long robe with an outer jacket. And the yin-yang master placed inside the coffin a small mirror and a talisman, which he said he had made to subdue the Official of the Day.<sup>9</sup> He told us to buy some incense and paper [sacrificial] money and to burn it as an offering in front of the coffin. Thereafter, my master told his servants that he wanted the keys to his chests, so that he could make an inventory of his clothing, and so on.

*Hu Tai further testified that Magistrate Wang had taken all the dead man's chests with him, including one that contained thirty liang of silver. The monk Yuanfu testified in turn that he had been away chanting scriptures on the night of the murder and returned at midnight, when he immediately went to bed. The next morning, Li Yuchang's servant Li Xiang told him of the death; after the inquest, he, too, observed blood around the head of the murdered man's bed and suspected poison.*

*The coroner Li Biao testified:*

"I am seventy-one sui in age, and I am the coroner for Shanyang District. On the seventh of the eleventh month of last year, about time for early tea, I went to the Virtuous Rewards Abbey to attend an inquest on the body of Li Yuchang. At that time, His Honor the prefect of Huai'an himself and [the district magistrate] Lord Wang were there to watch, along with their personal servants. . . .

*Despite the cursory nature of his initial examination of the corpse, Magistrate Wang had told Li Biao that it was not necessary to go further. The coroner had noticed the bloodstains at the mouth of the corpse, but the local warden had brought a copper pan of water with which to wash them off—on the orders of the prefect.<sup>10</sup>*

*An undated memorial from either the twenty-eighth or the twenty-ninth records that, because Wang Shenhan continued to stonewall the interrogation, he was subjected to the form of torture reserved for officials: his ears were twisted, and he was forced to kneel on chains. Then he testified:*

"Because I wanted to exaggerate the population figures and Li Yuchang would not agree, I conceived the idea of poisoning him."

Even after this, Wang would not reveal any of the details about how the poisoning was carried out. During testimony taken on the twenty-ninth by the governor-general of Liang Jiang and the provincial governor of Jiangsu, he admitted that the murdered man not only refused to inflate population figures in order to increase the relief payments to the area but was also planning to expose Wang. Li's servant Ma Liansheng finally provided the details. The emperor was so infuriated by this outrageous behavior that he wrote all over the memorial, harshly criticizing all of Wang's superiors who had failed to detect this fraud thus far.<sup>11</sup>

On the thirtieth, Wang Shenhan, now referred to as "the cashiered official," was questioned again, and again he prevaricated until subjected to further torture. Thereupon, he testified that he had plotted with Li Yuchang's servants Li Xiang and Bao Xiang, who in turn enlisted Ma Liansheng in the plot. Although the others confessed, Ma held out through hours of strenuous interrogation until finally, during the fourth watch of the night, he outlined the plot so that it was "as clear as a painting" (*lili ruhua*). Wang Shenhan provided more details:

"The reason for Li Yuchang's death was that Li Yuchang examined the population figures and came up with a little more than nine thousand households. I wanted him to add to it until it was more than ten thousand. I talked it over with Li's servant Li Xiang, and I told him to urge his master to compromise a bit and we all could benefit from it. But Li Xiang later told me that his master refused. Thereafter, when Li Yuchang came to the district court, I spoke to him about it directly, but he still refused. After that Li Xiang sent me a note saying that his master wanted to report me to the lieutenant governor [*fansi*] and that he had already completed a draft. I said, 'Not only will your master not go along, but he wants to turn me in instead! You go back and let me talk this over again.' After Li Xiang left, I told my gatekeeper Bao Xiang that Commissioner Li was going to turn me in, and he said, 'Why not talk over ways of doing him in with Li Xiang?' I said that would be taking the matter too far. 'You listen to hear whether in fact he is going to file a report and let me know.' That was on the fifth. On the sixth, I had planned on inviting the relief commissioners to come to the *yamen* to eat, but since the prefecture sent me out to investigate a murder case in Haizhou, it was late at night when I finally returned to the district, and the drinking party was all over. After I saw the guests off, I went to sleep.

"Early on the seventh, Bao Xiang said that he had already mentioned the subject we had been talking about the day before to Li Xiang, and he had promised him one hundred *liang* of silver to give to his local headman. Li had agreed to do it. But one person couldn't manage it all by himself, so he

had talked it over with Ma Liansheng and had promised him one hundred *liang* of silver for his local headman as well. Ma had also agreed. That night, when Magistrate Li returned to his lodgings, Li Xiang made him a pot of tea and put the poison in it, so that he could serve it to him when Magistrate Li happened to ask for some. But then he was afraid that the poison was not strong enough to do the trick, and that's why he talked with Ma Liansheng about killing Magistrate Li by hanging him. This is why Li Xiang reported on the seventh that his master had hanged himself. At that time, Bao Xiang told me what he [Li] had privately agreed with him. And since this was already a done deal, I had no choice but to try to save the situation. In order to have a way of investigating the suicide of a commissioner, I filed a report with the prefecture, asking the prefect for direction, and his order was that he would go with me to investigate.

"When we got to the abbey, I saw that Li Yuchang's mouth had bloodstains, and so I ordered the coroner to wash them off first in order to facilitate the examination. At that time, the prefect took no pains in the examination; before the body had been taken down, he only took a look at him from outside the chamber door, and thereafter he remained in his official chair at some distance from the body. That is why he never discerned the marks of poisoning. . . .

*For their part in the matter, Wang testified, Li's servants Li Xiang, Ma Liansheng, and his own servant Bao Xiang all received one hundred liang of silver, a princely amount.<sup>12</sup>*

*In another record of testimony taken that same day, Li Yuchang's servant Ma Liansheng added some fairly informal but very graphic details:*

"On the sixth of the winter [twelfth] month of last year, Shanyang District invited Magistrate Li [Li Yuchang] over. Li Xiang and I went along. When it got to be the second watch, we came back to our lodgings. The magistrate was a little drunk, so he sat down and wanted some tea to drink. Li Xiang poured him a cup of tea in the room outside and brought it in and gave it to him. The magistrate drank it right down. Li Xiang poured him another cup and left it on the table. The magistrate sat around smoking for a while, talking about this and that, and he drank that cup of tea, too. I waited on him as he got undressed and went to bed. The rest of us all went to our room and took off our clothes and were sitting around rolled up in our quilts when we heard somebody calling at the door.

"Li Xiang went out, and somebody came in and stood and talked for a

while in the dark. I asked Li Xiang who it was, and after I asked him a couple of times, he finally said it was Bao Xiang. Then Gu Xiang went out, and the three of them talked for a while. I said, 'Why don't you come sit in here where there's a light?' Li Xiang came in first; I asked him what Bao Xiang was doing here, and Bao Xiang said he wanted to ask our master to get up; there was something important he had to say to him. Then, Bao Xiang and Gu Xiang came in together. I said, 'If you have something to tell him, I'll go tell him for you. Why must you ask the master to get up?' Li Xiang said, 'The master took some medicine.' I said, 'The master's not sick. Why would he take medicine?' And Li Xiang said, 'The medicine the master took was poison!' I cried out, 'Why would you give the master poison?!' Li Xiang said that Bao Xiang had gotten some poison and had brought it over to give to him. He had put it into his tea and had given it to the master to drink. I wouldn't go along with Li Xiang and Bao Xiang. I asked them, 'Why did you want to hurt our master? I'm going to call for help!' Li Xiang and Bao Xiang said, 'It's no use to call for help; we already gave him the poison. If you call for help, it'll only involve you, and if you don't call, you can figure you will still be involved.' At that, I didn't dare say anything. After that, Bao Xiang promised me one hundred *liang* of silver.

"Bao Xiang told Li Xiang to go trick the Old Master into getting up. The Old Master asked what he had to say, and Li Xiang said that Bao Xiang had something important to say. At that, the Old Master got up, put on his clothes and socks, and stood in front of the bed. Li Xiang told Bao Xiang to go in, and Gu Xiang also went in. I stayed at the door looking in. Li Xiang and Gu Xiang squeezed in on him from both sides, and Bao Xiang went around behind him and grabbed him around the waist with his two hands, while Li and the other grabbed hold of his arms. The Old Master cried out, 'What's going on here?' Li Xiang kept hold of him by the arms, and Bao Xiang took advantage of the opportunity to take off his own sash [*dabao*] and wrap it several times around the Old Master's head and mouth.<sup>13</sup> Bao Xiang yelled out the door at me, 'Hurry up and get in here!' and he took off the Old Master's blue sash from around his waist, held it out to me, and told me to tie it up quick to the rafters of the room. Because I was scared of Bao Xiang and the others, all I could do was go into the room, get up on the bed, wrap the sash around the rafters a couple of times, and tie it up there. The three of them lifted up the master and hanged him from it. I went out at that point, but the three of them waited a while before they came out, too. I asked Bao Xiang and the rest why, after all, did they kill the master? And Bao Xiang said it was

because our master had messed with [*jiao*] them on the business of inspecting the relief efforts and had gotten in their way and wanted to report them to the lieutenant governor. Not only would it be hard for them to get their silver, but they were afraid he'd get them into trouble. Originally, they planned just to poison him, but they were afraid that the poison wasn't strong enough to kill him, so they covered up what they had done by making it look like he had hanged himself. So when they had covered up all they had done there, he left. It was sometime after the third watch then. Then Li Xiang, Gu Xiang, and I all went to bed. I don't know what time it was when the monk Yuanfu came back.

*From this point onward, his testimony matches that of other witnesses, with one final exception:*

"A few days later, Li Xiang came back and said he was going to go ask Bao Xiang for his silver. But Bao Xiang wouldn't give him any and instead asked Li Xiang what he meant by asking him for silver. After that, Li Xiang didn't dare ask him again. And I don't dare ask him for the hundred *liang* of silver he promised me either. Everything I've said in testimony is the truth."<sup>14</sup>

*In testimony taken either the first or the second of the following month (a day or two later), Wang Shenhan elaborated on his actions after the murder. After the inquest on Li Yuchang's body, the prefect left and Wang proceeded to ransack the dead man's chests for any official report on the embezzlement. He found what he was looking for, a complete draft of a report in which Li declared that the magistrate of Shanyang District wanted him to exaggerate the population in order to increase the amount of relief funds he could skim off for himself. Li also stated in the report that other inspectors were inflating the number of disaster victims for the same purpose and were attempting to circumvent his scrupulous accounting by preventing him from checking the census figures and having the jail warden check the figures instead. Wang admitted having sent Prefect Lin three hundred *liang* of silver with an additional one hundred for his assistant. He would gain around six hundred *liang* for every one thousand names added to the relief roster; and would share 30 percent of the spoils with the inspectors. The same day, Li's servant Ma Liansheng reiterated that he had not received any silver for his risks.<sup>15</sup>*

On the sixth of the seventh month, Li's servant Li Xiang provided a few more details. He testified that when he relayed to his master the message via Bao Xiang that he should inflate the relief rosters for their own benefit,

“... the master said that he most definitely would not dare overreport figures on his first time out as an official. And if Magistrate Wang insisted on overreporting, he would certainly file a complaint against him. And worse yet, he scolded us. I reported what he said to Bao Xiang, and because of that, the Shanyang magistrate hated him. . . .”

*Li Xiang made the fateful pot of tea with the arsenic (xinmo) Bao Xiang gave him. On the night of the murder, he said the following to Bao Xiang, out of Ma Liansheng's hearing:*

“At about midnight, Bao Xiang came over and called at the door. I opened the door for him, and he asked me, ‘Have you given the master the poison yet?’ I said that he’d taken it. He said, ‘Has it taken effect yet?’ And I said that it hadn’t. Bao Xiang said, ‘The only thing to do is to hang him to death.’ He told me to ask the Old Master to get up, but by then he was already moaning that he had pains around his heart. Ma Liansheng tricked him into getting up, and the Old Master got dressed. Bao Xiang walked around behind him and grabbed him around the waist, I grabbed him by the wrists, and Gu Xiang held his feet firm. The Old Master cried out, ‘What are you doing?’ and I wrapped my kerchief around his mouth. . . .”<sup>16</sup>

*Bao Xiang was not so forthcoming in admitting the particulars of his involvement in the murder, and so on the ninth of the seventh month, he was interrogated again.*

The felon consistently prevaricated, until we added twisting of the ears and kneeling on chains; he was rigorously examined for six to eight hours, until finally he testified: “. . . My master gave me a ‘red envelope’ [packet of money] and told me to talk to Li Xiang about giving them three hundred *liang* of silver if they poisoned Magistrate Li. I then gave the envelope to Li Xiang, and he took it. . . . At the time of the second watch, my master told me to go find out whether Magistrate Li had taken the poison. I went over to the abbey, and Li Xiang said that he had already taken it, but the effect was really strong, and he didn’t want anybody to hear him, so it would be better if we hanged him.”<sup>17</sup>

*On the tenth, the Grand Secretariat acknowledged receipt of an imperial instruction by noting that the victim's uncle, a military-degree holder from Shandong named Li Taiqing, had come to Beijing to file a complaint that his nephew had died under suspicious circumstances while on an inspection tour of relief efforts in Shanyang Dis-*

*trict. This text also records that the victim Li Yuchang had received his academic degree only the previous summer, and that the emperor had been impressed with him during the final examination and had appointed him to be a district magistrate in Jiangsu on the spot.<sup>18</sup> The emperor specifically lauded Li for upholding honesty in the face of intense pressure from his superiors to embezzle state funds. This is the first document to recommend that the victim's family should receive financial reward for his virtue and that the primary culprits be sent to Shandong to be executed at Li Yuchang's tomb. In addition, the emperor had penned a lengthy funerary poem to be inscribed on Li's tombstone. The uncle, Li Taiqing, was also to be rewarded for insisting on justice for his nephew.<sup>19</sup>*

*On that same day, Li Taiqing also testified about his nephew's return from the grave:*

“In the second month of this year, I don’t remember the date, Jing Chongfa, a person who had been my nephew’s classmate in times past, was riding along on a donkey in the vicinity of a bean-curd shop in the district seat when he saw people carrying a sedan chair coming toward him from the west along the main road. It was an official, and so he immediately dismounted from his donkey. When the official descended from the sedan chair, he recognized that it was my nephew. He made inquiries of him, and my nephew said that he was on his way to take office as the City God of Qixia District.<sup>20</sup> Jing Chongfa was terrified, and he ran home to tell his wife about it. He also said that his head hurt severely, and he asked her to help him up onto the *kang* to lie down. Then he asked for tea to drink, but when he picked it up to drink, he cried out; ‘Seeing this tea makes me think of that other time when I drank tea that was poisoned, and I died so bitterly!’ Jing Chongfa’s wife did not recognize that voice as her husband’s, and she asked him who he was. He said, ‘I am Li Yuchang. I was on my way to take office in Qixia District when I ran into my classmate Jing Chongfa, and I invited him to go with me to help in the administration.’ And at that moment, Jing Chongfa died. Jing’s wife told me this, and it is the truth.”<sup>21</sup>

*In testimony taken the following day, Li Taiqing related more information about himself:*

“I am fifty-nine *sui* this year. In Qianlong 44 [1779], I entered the military school in my home district. There were three of us—an older brother and a younger brother, and I am the second. This Li Yuchang was the son of my elder brother Li Taiyun. He had no brothers or sisters, but he leaves a daugh-

ter. I live in the same house with our younger brother Li Taining and my niece by marriage, Ms. Lin. My brother Li Taining has two sons, and I have four, the second of whom has my grandson, whose name is Lingshuang. He's seven *sui* old.

"On the seventeenth of the tenth month of last year [December 4, 1808], I set out from our native place and arrived in Jiangning on the ninth of the eleventh month [December 25]. But my nephew Li Yuchang had already left for Shanyang to inspect the relief efforts. I proceeded there to see him, and on the eighteenth [January 3, 1809], I arrived in Shanyang. I went to the Virtuous Rewards Abbey to visit, but Li Xiang and the others were all wearing white sashes around their waists. When I made inquiries, Li Xiang and the others said that my nephew had already hanged himself to death. I wept bitterly and asked them why he had done that. They said that after he arrived in Shanyang, my nephew's mind became confused and his words all turned around, as if he had gone mad. He hanged himself because he was ill. Both the prefect and the magistrate had inspected the body, and he had been enshrouded. I took the story as true, and so I did not open the coffin to see for myself. Li Xiang said that all of the burial clothing and the boards for the coffin had been provided by Magistrate Wang.<sup>22</sup> The prefect had also come by to offer condolences, and so I should go thank them. When I met with Magistrate Wang, he said that he'd been on good terms with my nephew and that he would pay for all expenses of transporting the coffin back to our ancestral home. Later, he sent over 150 *liang* of fine silver [*yuansi yin*]. I set out on the sixth of the twelfth month [January 21], and on the sixteenth of the first month of this year [March 1], I arrived in Jimo District [in Shandong] and arranged the fifth of the seven memorial services for my nephew. I talked with his widow about removing the official robes [*mangpao*] he ordinarily wore and burning them.<sup>23</sup> We opened his clothing chest to take out new official robes. But when I inspected his clothing, there were bloodstains on the front of it, and everything from his chest down his lapels to the cuffs of his sleeves also had bloodstains, as if he had wiped his mouth with the backs of his hands. The lapel of his jacket [*magua*] had a big bloodstain on it. My nephew's wife and I were very doubtful in our hearts that he had died of hanging, and we wanted to open the coffin to look. We withdrew the nails and opened the coffin lid and noticed lime on my nephew's face: they had used lime to hide dark spots on his face. When we opened his clothing, his whole body was black. In accordance with *The Washing Away of Wrongs*, we used a silver needle, and when we inspected it, indeed it was black. Nor could it be washed clean with soap and water. Only then were we certain that he

had been poisoned. Therefore, I came to Beijing to file a complaint. This is the truth."<sup>24</sup>

*Events rapidly came to a head from this point onward. An imperial pronouncement of the next day, August 21, 1809, outlines the penalties for the perpetrators:*

On Jiaqing 14.7.11, receipt of an EDICT that Li Xiang, Gu Xiang, and Ma Liansheng should be taken to the place of execution for death by dismemberment. Bao Xiang should be taken at once to the place of execution and beheaded. Li Xiang and the other three felons had all plotted to kill their master. Moreover, when his master Li Yuchang discovered the discrepancy in the relief records and was about to file a complaint at the lieutenant governor's office, Li Xiang went first to inform Bao Xiang secretly so that he in turn could inform Wang Shenhan, so that Bao Xiang and Wang Shenhan would plot to kill his master, having discussed it secretly beforehand with Li Xiang. This leading felon having agreed already, he discussed with Bao Xiang and Ma Liansheng that they should all act in concert.

This felon Li Xiang in particular being the chief criminal in this case, an official from the Board of Punishments will be deputed to escort the aforementioned felon to Shandong; along the route, local officials are to send troops and constables to guard him all the way there. Thereafter, custody is to be transferred to the prefect of Dengzhou, who will escort him to the tomb of Li Yuchang; there, he will be tortured by squeezing and then executed. Thereafter, his heart will be plucked out and offered as a sacrifice in order to alleviate the frustration and anger [of the murdered man].<sup>25</sup> Bao Xiang was the first to lay the plot; his viciousness is of the highest level. He should also be tortured by squeezing and then executed by beheading. The two felons Gu Xiang and Ma Liansheng, for their most serious offenses, will be beaten forty strokes each and then executed. Qin Ying, a senior official at the Board of Punishments, is deputed to go to the city prison to observe the punishment being carried out. As for the felon Wang Shenhan, because Li Yuchang upheld the right and refused to comply with him in the embezzlement of relief funds, and because he plotted along with Bao Xiang to poison him [Li], he should be sentenced to immediate beheading. However, he is to be granted temporary reprieve pending further interrogation. Let the others be punished as recommended. So be it.<sup>26</sup>

*Subsequent communications on that same day stipulate penalties for any upper-level administrators who had failed to apprehend those who sought to profit from the relief*

efforts and include a summary document clarifying all the evidence. The emperor concluded that this was a crime of “unprecedented” evil deserving the most severe punishments. The former magistrate Wang was sentenced to beheading with delay until the autumn assizes. Following the common practice of reducing sentences one degree, Wang’s execution was commuted to one hundred blows with the heavy rod and exile three thousand li from his home, to Shuntian near Beijing in this case, in part because of his advanced age: Wang was more than seventy sui old, and the law stipulated reduced sentences for the very young and the very old.<sup>27</sup> In a later report from the same day, Wang Shenhan was questioned closely about his relations with all other administrators who had endeavored to cover up his scheme. Had he bribed them all? One had been an old friend whom he had presented with a gift of two hundred liang of silver when he was posted in the area, Wang testified. Being a person who does not forget kindnesses, the friend was willing to help him out without further reward. Even so, Wang sent him another one thousand liang soon after the murder and another similar amount at the New Year. Prefect Lin had not been a party to the murder, he declared. How would he dare to sacrifice a person of Lin’s position to cover up his own misdeeds? He had sent Lin five hundred liang in gratitude for Lin’s concern, however—with another hundred for his assistant. When asked where he had gotten all the silver that he had given away so liberally, Wang responded:

“By this time, I was a criminal who had committed a grave offense that could in no way be forgiven; it didn’t matter how much I spent anymore. Even if it was not only this amount, why should I try to conceal it?”

Quoting the familiar aphorism about the truth of a major crime ultimately being revealed, the report concludes, “When the water falls, the rocks are exposed.”<sup>28</sup>

The Jiaqing emperor’s poem in Li Yuchang’s memory is titled “Grieving for the Loyal” (Minzhong shi). Since he had met the man not long before he was murdered, the monarch’s grief may have been heart-felt. The emperor was fifty that year, and such corruption within his administration surely must have been a great source of frustration.<sup>29</sup> Wang Gu, the prefect of Huai’an, testified that he had been negligent in his observation of Li Yuchang’s corpse, but he had not been bribed to give a false report at the original inquest. He did receive a gift of silver from Wang Shenhan later, however, a total of two thousand liang.<sup>30</sup> Tie Bao, the member of the Grand Council whose correspondence began this case, was exiled to Urumqi in Xinjiang for ignoring the corruption going on beneath him in the hierarchy, as was the eldest son of Wang Shenhan, in accordance with the principle of punishing the families of the worst criminals. Wang’s other three sons were pardoned.<sup>31</sup> By final tally, Wang Shenhan had apparently given away—or promised—twenty-three thousand liang of sil-

ver in connection with the case, although there was still some doubt about the accuracy of this figure.

#### NOTES

Source: *Shangyu dang* [Archive of imperial edicts], First Historical Archives, Beijing.

1. Joanna Waley-Cohen kindly provided a photocopy of these documents from the First Historical Archives, Beijing. Not all documents relating to the same case are grouped together; instead, they appear in the chronological order in which all such communications were received. For an analysis of this case and some of its ramifications, see Waley-Cohen, “Politics and the Supernatural.” I am grateful for her assistance with the translation.

2. *Shangyu dang*, Jiaqing 14.6.21, 253–54.

3. The yin-yang master was presumably a Daoist priest of the informal Red Hat order.

4. *Shangyu dang*, Jiaqing 14.6.23, 277–80.

5. *Ibid.*, Jiaqing 14.6.26, 317–18.

6. *Ibid.*, Jiaqing 14.6.27, 325.

7. *Ibid.*, Jiaqing 14.6.27, 327.

8. *Ibid.*, Jiaqing 14.6.28, 339–40.

9. The talisman, made “to subdue the spirit of the day” (*fu rizi de benguan*), would serve to protect—or contain—the spirit of the dead, presumably because the priest suspected foul play.

10. *Shangyu dang*, Jiaqing 14.6.28, 343–45.

11. *Ibid.*, Jiaqing 14.6.29, 351, 353–55.

12. *Ibid.*, Jiaqing 14.6.30, 363, 365–67. By comparison, Naquin notes that in the 1810s, a soldier was paid 1.8 *liang* and two *dan* of rice per month, and in northern China, farmland sold for less than 2 to nearly 4 *liang* per *mou* (*Millenarian Rebellion*, 281).

13. The sash was a length of cloth worn around the waist and could be used for carrying things.

14. *Shangyu dang*, Jiaqing 14.6.30, 369–72.

15. *Ibid.*, Jiaqing 14.7.1 (or 14.7.2), 11–13. On the same day, the coroner reiterated that he had just followed orders in identifying the cause of death and that he had received no payment at all for his interpretation. *Ibid.*, 15.

16. *Ibid.*, Jiaqing 14.7.6, 87–89. For Gu Xiang’s identical account, see *ibid.*, 91–92; and for Ma Liansheng’s corroboration of these events, see *ibid.*, 93–94. At the end of this third confession, it is recorded that all three servants were transferred to the Board of Punishments prison to await sentencing.



17. *Ibid.*, Jiaqing 14.7.9, 161–62.
18. The highest academic degree, *jinsi*, was awarded to those few who passed an extensive series of examinations, the last of which was an oral examination administered ostensibly by the emperor himself. Apparently in this case, the Jiaqing emperor did administer that portion and remembered Li Yuchang clearly. This might explain the extreme penalties levied against the murderers.
19. *Shangyu dang*, Jiaqing 14.7.10, 181–83. For the memorial poem, see *ibid.*, Jiaqing 14.7.11, 213–14.
20. The divine pantheon of late imperial China paralleled the hierarchy of the world of the living, with several administrative levels. District-level City Gods, literally, Lords of Walls and Moats (Chenghuang Daye), were regional deities, whose duties included making certain that justice prevailed. Even today, some Chinese file lawsuits with these deities at the same time that they take their opponents to court, in the hope that the administrators of the unseen world will enforce justice in this world as well. See Katz, “Indictment Rituals.”
21. *Shangyu dang*, Jiaqing 14.7.10, 185–86. For another translation of this passage, see Waley-Cohen, “Politics and the Supernatural,” 344–45.
22. Coffins were made from the most fragrant and sturdiest wood the family could afford, as a mark of respect for the dead; consequently, they could be quite expensive. Magistrate Wang’s purchase of the boards for Li Yuchang’s coffin was meant to be seen as his effort to console the family. Buddhist services for the dead might include chanting of scriptures for the first seven days afterward and on every seventh day thereafter until the forty-ninth day.
23. Presumably as a burnt sacrifice, so that he might have them to wear in the spirit world.
24. *Shangyu dang*, Jiaqing 14.7.11, 203–5. Sung Tz’u’s *The Washing Away of Wrongs* was used from the thirteenth into the twentieth century as a reference guide for forensic examinations. Many educated households seem to have had their own copies. The guide notes that a silver needle inserted into the mouth of a person who has died of arsenic poisoning will come out black and cannot be washed clean.
25. Although not unique during the Qing period, such mutilation of a criminal and sacrifice to his victim were extremely rare. See Waley-Cohen, “Politics and the Supernatural,” 337.
26. *Shangyu dang*, Jiaqing 14.7.11, 217–18.
27. *Ibid.*, Jiaqing 14.7.11, 227–32. The law about reduced punishments for the young and the old is Article 22 of the Qing penal code; it specifically excludes redemption for those who commit death-penalty offenses. See Jones, *Great Qing Code*, 52.
28. *Shengyu dang*, Jiaqing 14.7.11, 237–40.

29. See the exchange between the Grand Secretariat and the emperor, in *ibid.*, Jiaqing 14.7.12, 243.

30. *Ibid.*, 14.7.12 (or 14.7.13), 257–59, 261. Wang Gu was so distraught over being implicated in this case that he attempted suicide by stabbing himself; he was later sentenced to immediate strangulation. Waley-Cohen, “Politics and the Supernatural,” 337.

31. *Shengyu dang*, Jiaqing 14.7.22, 400. The law concerning the punishment of family members of the most serious offenders is very ancient; it appears in Articles 254 and 255 of the Qing penal code concerning crimes against the state. See Jones, *Great Qing Code*, 237–39.